

Dan Wu: Behind the Pottery Wheel

The balcony is cluttered with plastic-covered slabs of clay and precariously placed stacks of unfinished pots littered around the workbench. Every so often, distant sounds of traffic slice through the silence, but Dan Wu's eyes are glued to the task laid out in front of him. With steady hands, he carves out the edge of the soap dish, his focus unwavering as the blade glides through the clay. After lifting the cut clay from the piece, Wu gently smooths the edges with his fingers before adding his newest creation to the ever-growing pile beside him. Wiping his hands on his apron, he takes a quick stretch and readjusts his glasses before picking up the next dish.

Wu was only 20 years old when he found his calling by chance. After taking a job teaching in a summer camp, he was tasked with teaching pottery and, despite only having being taught for an hour himself, found himself captivated by the process. "I found it so fascinating that you could literally create a cup from a lump of clay in a matter of minutes," he recalls. The brief stint turned out to be life changing as ceramics became one of his biggest passions.

Though Wu had already been pursuing a bachelor's degree in 3D design, he had never thought to study ceramics as most of his classmates opted for wood- or metalwork. This would end up working to his advantage: the nicheness of his newfound hobby meant that he was often the only student to make use of the university's pottery studio, where he began to spend upwards of six hours daily.

After discovering his propensity for ceramics, Wu centred his life around pottery. A self-proclaimed "YouTube Potter", he relied on online tutorials to kickstart his journey. "In a way, it was good that I didn't have a teacher because now, I have absolutely no preconceptions about what is considered the right – or wrong – way to do pottery," Wu says. "To me, there are only ways that work and ways that don't." After graduating with a degree in ceramics, he worked part-time as a pottery instructor before eventually founding The Broke Potter, an online pottery store.

Though his fixation may seem extreme to some, Wu's closest friends are no strangers to his one-track mind. "Dan has always been someone who was really passionate about his hobbies," says Michael Li, who has known Wu since primary school. "Once he gets properly stuck into something, there is no turning back. He's always investing time in improving himself and learning new things."

Indeed, Wu found his stride in innovation. After picking up the basics, the budding potter took it upon himself to invent new pottery techniques – not a single day goes by that he isn't found tinkering with clay. "If you're not trying something new or improving on an existing process every time, you'll get bored quickly," he says, citing stagnation as the reason he quit his job as a pottery instructor last year. "I became tired of teaching because it was the same thing over and over again – I wasn't really discovering anything new."

Wu even opted for a change in environment, stepping away from the familiarity of his favourite pottery studio to create a workspace at home. Now equipped with only an IKEA table and pegboard, he is on a journey of rediscovery; learning to work without professional equipment has forced him to reinvent techniques that were once second nature to him, and Wu is enjoying the challenge. "Things that were once so simple now take more planning," he says. "Hand-built objects have a different energy to them; they feel more organic than objects produced on the wheel, and I like

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that a lot.” Feeling reinvigorated, Wu is busier than ever, adding brand-new products like planters, spoon rests and toothbrush holders to his growing repertoire.

But while others view pottery as a creative endeavour, Wu hesitates to call himself an artist, choosing instead to take on a more technical approach. “I’m a very analytical person, so if there is no metric where I can measure my success, I feel a little lost,” he says. “Rather than simply making something that looks pretty, I want a lot of people to be able to use my work; I’m always looking at efficiency and thinking about how to optimise my process.”

However, what truly sets Wu apart is the genuine passion he feels toward his work. What is seemingly a mundane hobby is made to feel like much more when one sees the pride and meticulous attention to detail he puts in creating each of his pieces. Wu’s close friend Claudia Chow remembers one of the first conversations between the two: “Dan was talking about how he wanted to create ergonomic ceramics and dinnerware, which at the time I thought was pretty specific,” Chow recalls. “He described a bowl with two holes on either side so that chopsticks could slot perfectly within it, and I remember thinking how detail-oriented and dedicated to his craft he was.”

Despite Wu’s dedication to his craft, it was his friends who encouraged him to start his own pottery business. “He already had the artistic skill,” says Charms Gapasin, a former colleague who designed Wu’s logo and helped set up the Instagram page for his store. “He just needed a little push – someone to help him see what we all saw in his work.”

After some convincing, Gapasin’s proposal came to fruition – Wu is now the proud founder of his own store, where he sells handcrafted pieces created directly from his balcony. “It was actually a necessity [to start selling] because there were just too many pots in my house,” he laughs. “If I’m going to continue doing pottery, someone else would have use my work – I can’t drink from ten mugs.” Wu has already found success; in the past year, he has made over 210k from his pottery work alone, and he has even bigger plans in the making. Most recently, he has partnered with skincare brand Soap Yummy to offer joint soap-making and ceramic workshops.

Despite Wu’s achievements, he is careful not to become complacent. Ever the go-getter, he has already found his latest fascination – computer programming – and is taking online classes to pursue a degree. However, he has no plans of ever quitting pottery. “Maybe I’ll eventually stop selling. I don’t think I can ever consider it as a full-on career, or it’ll get quite boring,” Wu laughs. “But pottery – I don’t think I’ll ever stop doing it, because there’s just too much to learn. It’s never ending.”